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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 001756

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#) [IT](#) [NATO](#) [AFGHANISTAN](#) [IRAQI](#) [FREEDOM](#)

SUBJECT: ITALIAN PRT-FSB DECISION RESTS WITH PM BERLUSCONI

REF: A. STATE 96082

[1](#)B. IIR 147

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR THOMAS COUNTRYMAN
FOR REASONS 1.5(B)(D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Italy's ability to contribute a Forward Support Base (FSB) or Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in western Afghanistan depends on whether the Prime Minister's office can free up scarce resources to fund the effort, according to Embassy contacts at the MFA, MOD and the PM's Office. Francesco Talo', a deputy Diplomatic Advisor in the PM's Office, told Pol-Mil Officer on May 4 that he would take reftel points directly to PM Berlusconi, who has been studying the issue this week. Post plans to make full use of USNATO Ambassador Burns' visit to Rome on May 7 to emphasize the critical need for Italy to take on the western Afghanistan FSB. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Pol-Mil Officer delivered reftel points to MFA NATO Affairs Office Director Giovanni Brauzzi, DefMin Diplomatic Advisor Francesco Trupiano, and Talo' in separate meetings on May 4. DATT also conveyed the points to VCHOD Gen. Castegnetti. Brauzzi and Trupiano indicated that the issue is now under review in the Prime Minister's Office. The decision on whether to stand up an FSB and/or contribute a PRT in western Afghanistan will most likely be made by PM Berlusconi himself because it will require shifting limited resources among existing obligations and priorities, Brauzzi said. In a later meeting, Talo' explained that no defense funds are available to cover the associated costs. If the PM decides to make the FSB/PRT an MOD priority, funds will have to be reallocated from an existing mission before the FSB/PRT project can move forward. Given Italy's tight economic situation, Talo' added, it will not be easy to free up the kind of funding needed for a mission of this magnitude. He said he would take reftel points directly to PM Berlusconi, who has been reviewing the issue this week.

[1](#)3. (C) The VCHOD, Gen. Castegnetti, echoed this message in his May 4 meeting with the DATT (see IIR). After studying the matter, the MOD has concluded that it cannot afford to fund either an FSB or a PRT, Castegnetti told the DATT. The MOD has informed the PM's Office of this conclusion; if contributing an FSB and/or a PRT is determined to be an Italian priority, funding will need to be shifted from an existing obligation or additional defense funds will need to be appropriated by parliament. Castegnetti said defense officials have weighed the possibility of bringing Italy's mission in Albania to a close as one possible source of funds. Another approach might be to designate some military forces now operating within Italy to the job. At this point, the PM's Office will need to make the call.

[1](#)4. (C) Comment. Our contacts are keenly aware that Italy's commitment to take on the FSB is critical to ISAF expansion into western Afghanistan. PM Berlusconi and DefMin Martino offered to contribute a PRT last fall as a sign of Italian support for ISAF expansion; that support continues, despite our retraction of our request for a PRT in Ghazni. Concerns about finding the resources to do the job are real, however. With approximately 1.5% of GDP allocated for defense spending, the MOD is already straining to support operations in the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan and over 20 other hotspots, while also modernizing and transforming the military services.

[1](#)5. (C) Comment cont'd. Amb. Burns' visit to Rome on May 7 presents an ideal opportunity to urge the Italians to think creatively about how to support ISAF expansion in western Afghanistan. Amb. Burns and Amb. Sembler can engage directly with Martino and Berlusconi's Diplomatic Advisor, Giovanni Castellaneta, at a dinner Amb. Sembler is hosting on May 7. We are coordinating with the PM's office to arrange an earlier meeting between Amb. Sembler and Castellaneta, should that be required. End Comment.

[1](#)6. (U) Minimize Considered

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